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SECTION: Part A; WORLD; Pg. A9**LENGTH:** 935 words**HEADLINE:** Bosnia gains arms despite embargo ;
Friendly Arab nations fund supply**BYLINE:** Andrew Borowiec; THE WASHINGTON TIMES**BODY:**

Weapons from disbanded Lebanese militias are pouring into the Balkans despite an international arms embargo, keeping Bosnia's Muslims supplied for an extended conflict, according to Middle East sources and intelligence reports.

The sources said the arms are being paid for by friendly Arab countries who transfer the funds through front companies based in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia as well as the Belgian branch of a French bank.

Some of these companies have been infiltrated by Serbian agents who managed to divert some of the payments to the Serbian capital, Belgrade.

The bulk of the weapons, according to Middle Eastern informants, are of Iraqi origin. But sophisticated technology has also been purchased by Bosnian Muslims in Europe.

The picture of the trade is emerging gradually, indicating an intricate web spanning the Middle East and southern Europe.

Experts believe it is just one of several channels by which arms are reaching the Bosnian Muslims in spite of the international embargo. The Washington Times reported last week that Iranian arms were reaching the Muslims through Croatia by other means.

U.S. specialists in Middle Eastern affairs said they were aware of the shipments of Lebanese arms and described the reports of large shipments as "more than plausible."

One weapons order, made available to The Washington Times, listed 5,000 AK-47 assault rifles, 100 light machine guns, 100 medium machine guns, 1,000 grenade launchers plus a large quantity of ammunition.

"There were sales we knew about, from Lebanese stocks and even individuals," said Michael Eisenstadt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"In many cases I suspect profit as the main motive," he added. "The Middle East has always been a large arms market and now Bosnia is the logical client."

"This report is more than plausible," agreed Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service. "There is always a demand for surplus weapons and the disarming of the militias in Lebanon created a large supply. Some traders like to combine it with an ideological aspect of helping Bosnia's Muslims."

Most militias laid down their arms after the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war but large quantities remained hidden in depots, particularly of the Christian "Lebanese Forces."

"There are definitely arms shipments from the Middle East to Bosnia, but I wouldn't speculate as to who's involved," said Janusz Bugajski, Balkan affairs expert for the Center For Strategic and International Studies.

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Most of the weapons appear to be of Iraqi origin simply because that country sold large quantities in the late 1980s to the Lebanese Forces, which was harassing the Syrian occupation troops.

After 1991, when the Yugoslav federation fell apart, Serbian, Croatian and Muslim agents contacted Middle Eastern sources for weapons and ammunition. One of the key middlemen was Samir Geagea, former head of the Lebanese Forces, now accused of slaying a rival Christian leader in the last days of the civil war.

Informants described the depots of the Lebanese Forces as "huge," claiming that the first of at least three major shipments from Iraq to the LF included 90 tanks, 190 armored personnel carriers, 80 field guns, 136 mortars and 40,000 Iraqi-made assault rifles based on the Soviet AK-47.

When shipments to Bosnia began, even before the Serbian-Croatian war spread to involve the Muslims, the financing was reportedly handled by a Saudi "charity" known as the "Executive Committee for Bosnia's Relief Funds." The committee's official purpose was to transfer funds to Bosnia for humanitarian aid.

Another financial institution involved in the growing trade was identified as the Belgian branch of the Banque Nationale de Paris, which has an affiliate banking institution in Beirut, the BNPI-Beirut.

Sources said Turkey – and especially the Aegean seaport of Izmir – became the central transit point where weapons were unloaded from ships from Lebanese ports.

"The weapons were repackaged in Izmir and concealed on container and tanker trucks," one Middle Eastern intelligence report said. "From Izmir, the weapons-carrying convoys made a long drive to Croatia via Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary."

From Croatia the shipments were sent to Bosnia's Croatian and Muslim units. It has been much simpler to get weapons to the Muslims since they and the Croats formed a coalition against the republic's Serbs earlier this year.

As the fighting in Bosnia intensified, Muslims requested larger and more frequent shipments, indicating that financing was not a problem.

At one stage, according to the Middle Eastern intelligence report, "Sarajevo [Bosnia's capital] asked the Turks to expedite the delivery of Lebanese weapons, even at the risk of discovery and loss."

By the end of 1993, "the Muslim forces became interested not just in weapons and ammunition for immediate use, but also in military technology in order to develop some local production capabilities," the report said.

It said sophisticated military systems were purchased in East and West European countries. Arab countries provided fraudulent "end user" certificates permitting the systems to be sold in spite of the embargo on arms sales to the former Yugoslavia.

In order to reduce the risk that such purchases would be traced, Bosnian Muslims established several front companies. Three of them were identified as Onis, Glisnatza and Energo Invest.

GRAPHIC: Graphic, BUYING ARMS FOR BOSNIA: This is a photocopy of a list of weapons offered for sale to a Bosnian buyer by a Beirut middleman. The prices and identity of the supplier have been obliterated. The quantity is sufficient to equip an infantry brigade.

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